“So you are going to show up!” his voice took off in one of its flights, “and you brought me something to eat from down South, didn’t you? Honeysuckle and molasses or something like that? Corn bread? . . . I was silenced by the sight of him propped by white hospital-looking pillows in a big armchair. Despite everything at the Devon Infirmary, he had seemed an athlete there, temporarily injured in a game; as though the trainer would come in any minute and tape him up. Propped now before a great New England fireplace, on this quiet old street, he looked to me like an invalid, house-bound.

“I brought … Well I never remember to bring anyone anything.” I struggled to get my voice above this self-accusing murmur. “I’ll send you something. Flowers or something.” . . .

“As a matter of fact,” I brought out all the cheerfulness I could find for this, “there was a fire. . .” How was I going to begin talking about it? It would not be just a thunderbolt. It wouldn’t even seem real.

Not in this conversation, not in this room. I wished I had met him in a railroad station, or at some highway intersection. Not here. Here the small window panes shone from much polishing and the walls were hung with miniatures and old portraits. The chairs were either heavily upholstered and too comfortable to stay awake in or Early American and never used. There were several square, solid tables covered with family pictures and random books, and also three small, elegant tables not used for anything. It was a compromise of a room, with a few good “pieces’” for guests to look at, and the rest of it for people to use.

But I had known Finny in an impersonal dormitory, a gym, a field. In the room we shared at Devon many strangers had lived before us. It was there that I had done it, but it was here that I would have to tell it. I felt like a wild man who had stumbled in from the jungle to tear the place apart.

I moved back in the Early American chair. Its rigid back and high armrests immediately forced me into a righteous posture. My blood could start to pound if it wanted to; let it. I was going ahead. “I was dunking about you most of the trip up.”

“Oh yeah?” He glanced briefly into my eyes.

“I was thinking about you … and the accident.”

“There’s loyalty for you. To think about me when you were on a vacation.”

“I was thinking about it, about you because I was thinking about you and the accident because I caused it.”

Finny looked steadily at me, his face very handsome and expressionless. “What do you mean, you caused it?” His voice was as steady as his eyes.

My own voice sounded quiet and foreign. “I jounced the limb. I caused it.” One more sentence. “I deliberately jounced the limb so you would fall off.”

He looked older than I had ever seen him. “Of course you didn’t.”

“Yes I did. I did!”

“Of course you didn’t do it. You damn fool. Sit down, you damn fool.”

“Of course I did!”

“I’m going to hit you if you don’t sit down.”

“Hit me!” I looked at him. “Hit me! You can’t even get up! You can’t even come near me!”

“I’ll kill you if you don’t shut up.”

“You see! Kill me! Now you know what it is! I did it because I felt like that! Now you know yourself!”

“I don’t know anything. Go away. I’m tired and you make me sick. Go away.” He held his forehead wearily, an unlikely way.

It struck me then that I was injuring him again. It occurred to me that this could be an even deeper injury than what I had done before. I would have to back out of it, I would have to disown it. Could it be that he might even be right? Had I really and definitely and knowingly done it to him after all? I couldn’t remember, I couldn’t think. However it was, it was worse for him to know it. I had to take it back. But not here.

“You’ll be back at Devon in a few weeks, won’t you?” I muttered after both of us had sat in silence.

“Sure, I’ll be there by Thanksgiving anyway.”

At Devon, where every stick of furniture didn’t assert that Finny was a part of it, I could make it up to him.

Now I had to get out of there. There was only one way to do it; I would have to make every move false. “I’ve had an awfully long trip,” I said, “I never sleep much on trains. I guess I’m not making too much sense today.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I think I’d better get to the station. I’m already a day late at Devon.”

“You aren’t going to start living by the rules, are you?”

I grinned at him. “Oh no, I wouldn’t do that,” and that was the most false thing, the biggest lie of all.